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Re-imagining public journalism for community media.

## Abstract

This paper explores the use of public journalism within a community radio news context. It argues that, the central tenets of the public journalism movement can help to frame, more adequately, a news gathering and production approach Tailored to the needs of community media. . Community radio stations generally enjoy strong relationships with their listeners and play an important role in the formation of the community itself (Lowrey et al., 2008). This paper argues that such strong community ties, in conjunction with public journalism news gathering approaches give community radio stations a strong opportunity to produce relevant, local news sourced driven by their listeners.

In this regard ,this paper examines a particular case of public journalism used within the *The Wire*, a national, daily current affairs program broadcast on community radio. In the case study examined here ,public journalism informed story production that were designed to better meet the needs of community radio stations and their audiences..

## Introduction

Public journalism enjoyed a brief period of popularity in the 1990s but the high investment, in terms of money, time and manpower was, more generally, not matched by quick and strong audience responses. results. Those projects that were persevered with did provide impressive results, over the longer term.. Levels of audience engagement were higher..... Journalists formed closer bonds with their communities and prepared reports of sensitivity and depth on the issues facing these communities. Perhaps i

Such a development would seem particularly timely in the Australian media when the community radio sector in Australia is one of few media sectors that is steadily growing.

At a time when newspaper readership is in decline and the online medium struggles to attract advertising and to overcome the paywalling of relevant material community radio stations continue to open and the sector reaches more people. Such an expansion might be explained, in part, through the findings of listener surveys indicating that audiences appreciate the local focus and personal approach of community radio.

## Background

This paper seeks to frame the discussion on the potential relationship between public journalism and community media through the use of the concept of the rhizome. The rhizome, is a construction suggested by alternative media scholars Carpentier, Cammearts and Bailey (2008) in their seminal text, *Understanding Alternative Media*. This concept is an extension of Deleuze and Guattari's 1987 metaphor which juxtaposes arborescent, or linear and hierarchical, thinking with rhizomatic thinking which is chaotic, non-linear and variable. A rhizomatic approach to alternative media focuses on three aspects: interconnectedness, fluidity and alternative media's role as a meeting place for civil society (Carpentier et al., 2008). While these aspects of community radio are explored using many different terminologies, the literature surrounding community radio largely

supports the rhizome construct (Daniels, 2012; Forde, 2011; Lowrey et al, 2008, Van Vuuren, 2001). Alternative media as rhizome aligns with many of the key principals of public journalism which presents a number of opportunities for community radio news.

A key aspect of community media as rhizome is its interconnected nature. The role of community media acting as a support network and also connecting various aspects of communities aligns with much of the existing literature. A common thread throughout is that communities themselves rely on these support networks and connections to function effectively. Potapchuk and Crocker (1999) describe “bridge-building organisations” like community radio stations as essential to maintaining civic capital and collective collaboration. Lowrey, Brozana and Mackay even go so far as to argue that community organisations themselves can support the construction of their communities. They note that “structure and location are not community in and of themselves, but rather they encourage and intensify the process of community... Community news media, then, are media capable of fostering the process of community” (2008, p. 288). Community media acting in this capacity has been touched in an extensive survey of community radio listeners in Australia. One of the key reasons that listeners tune in was that “community media quite simply gave them a sense of being part of the community” (Forde, 2011, p. 110). It is widely accepted in the literature that community media plays an essential role in connecting, and even constructing, communities and therefore could be considered rhizomatic. It is important to note though, how exactly this occurs.

The interconnected nature of community radio is constructed through its approaches to broadcasting. These approaches are characterised by fluidity, Carpentier et al’s second aspect of community media as rhizome. Fluidity refers to the flexibility and contingency embraced by community broadcasting, a stark contrast to the rigid practices of mainstream or commercial media (Carpentier et al., 2008). Examples of fluidity are ubiquitous within community radio; alternative media explore alternative approaches to most aspects of day-to-day operations - funding, programming, presenters, and so on. Van Vuuren (2001, p. 15) conducted case study research at a community radio in South East Queensland and observed that:

Weather reports are provided by local professional fishermen; a local taxi company gives traffic reports; a market report comes from the Brisbane-based wholesale fruit and vegetable market; and the station broadcasts a job search program with the assistance of employment agencies.

Considering the rhizomatic nature of community media highlights the flexible and resourceful nature of these approaches to broadcasting. The fluid and interconnected nature of community radio programming however is not limited to weather reports and public service announcements. The type of news and current affairs coverage broadly adapt a fluid approach to news in line with the theoretical concept of the rhizome. In this regard, Forde, Meadows and Foxwell note that “the community radio sector is fulfilling a broad but largely unacknowledged role in the Australian mediascape, particularly as a source of local content” (2002, p. 3). In sourcing suitable content for news, community journalists acknowledge that what is news to the listeners of Joy FM in Melbourne may not be news to those tuning in to 8CCC in Alice Springs. So while the rhizomatic nature of community radio is embraced throughout program and even news formats, approaches to journalism and news-gathering remain traditional.

The final aspect of exploring community radio as rhizome is the role of alternative media as a meeting place for civil society. Carpentier et al elaborate on this point by noting that alternative media acts as a “crossroads where people from different types of movements and struggles meet and collaborate” which in turn “deepens democracy by linking diverse democratic struggles” (2008, p. 31). Re-thinking the prevailing approaches to journalism within community radio presents an opportunity to support and expand on this role as a meeting place. This thesis argues that public journalism could be a more appropriate avenue for community radio news than more common approaches. Pioneering advocate for Australian public journalism, Cratis Hippocrates, explains the approach as “designed to give the community an opportunity to have a voice on an issue and to have an issue completely discussed, in a user-friendly manner, with a range of points of view represented” (1999, p. 66). A journalism that facilitates these kinds of deliberative discussions within communities would further reinforce community radio as rhizome. This paper advocates for re-imagining the tenets of public journalism to better suit community radio as rhizome and therefore better serve the listeners of community radio stations.

Public journalism was introduced by media practitioners and scholars in the 1990s. Categorised by Romano (2010) as a form of “deliberative journalism”, public journalism differs from traditional journalism through its approaches to sourcing and reporting news. It relies on relationships with the community to ascertain what is important to them and, therefore, what is news as opposed to the ‘news of the day’ dictated by other media outlets and major government and commercial organisations. As simple as it seems, public journalism has so far struggled to be fully integrated into newsrooms on a permanent basis. This paper argues that the reason for this is the lack of guidelines that explain the common characteristics of public journalism and how these characteristics can be practically applied. As Davidson points out “It is not often clear, however, how the ideals of public journalism should be translated into newsroom practices... this has probably been part of the reason for the failure of public journalism to take greater hold within the mainstream” (2010, p. 35). Charity (1995) outlines a number of practical approaches in a ‘handbook-style’ publication, *Doing Public Journalism*, however his focus is predominantly on newspapers and is increasingly dated. Nonetheless, the text provides a useful foundation from which to base public journalism projects and informed the early stages of this research.

While there have been significant amounts of research and experiments conducted in the USA, there have been only limited encounters with public journalism in Australia, particularly in a community radio context. One such experiment in public journalism was conducted at a major metropolitan newspaper, *The Courier Mail*. Romano noted that several journalists “expressed confusion about how to serve an identifiable ‘community’ through civic journalism while working for a publication that served many disparate communities across the state” (2010, p. 72). This potentially identifies an advantage community radio stations could have over other media as a means of public journalism; the participatory nature of these stations means that they are an important part of the community they serve. This potential advantages has however, been largely unexplored. When referring to community journalism within the broadcasting industry, Daniels (2012, p. 188) notes that:

“The area is under-researched compared to many other aspects of journalism and mass communication, there is considerable opportunity here for scholars to develop and test new approaches, to advance existing theories or suggest new concepts, and also to examine issues that have been overlooked for decades”.

By exploring the potential applications of public journalism within a community radio newsroom, this research aimed to fill these knowledge gaps.

When returning to the concept of alternative media as a rhizome of the community, the use of public journalism in community radio presents ample opportunities to strengthen ties between the station, the journalists and their listeners. Community radio already has a distinct advantage in this respect as the stations are already an intrinsic part of their communities. Forde, Foxwell and Meadows support this sentiment, explaining that news and current affairs coverage within the sector already relies “heavily on local meetings, conversations, regular contacts, and local newspapers for story ideas” (2003, p. 332). By encouraging community radio journalists to extend their practice to engage more deeply with their listeners and the local news, all aspects of the station’s programming can become deeply embedded in the community. This in turn has the potential to strengthen community radio’s rhizomatic presence and the community as a whole. As influential public journalism author Jay Rosen explains, “the power of the press thus empowers others besides the press” (1995, p. 160).

### **Methodology – Worth including?**

This case study employed a constructivist, phenomenologically-driven methodology in order to examine existing practices within *The Wire*’s newsroom and incorporate public journalism. The nature of community radio supports the use of a constructivist paradigm through its recognition and embrace of alternative perspectives. **REFERENCE**

Within this case study, auto-ethnography and reflective practice was employed to collect data which was then analysed using phenomenological and thematic analyses.

This study was an example of practice-based research using journalism as creative practice.

Employing this research paradigm is an effective way of exploring an aspect of journalistic theory through the development of a creative work, in this case a piece of radio journalism, and reflections on the process (Lindgren and Phillips, 2011).

The production of radio is often seen as a practical skill based on experience, rather than a process informed by academic methods and rigour. Lindgren 2011 77...

### **The Experiment**

*The Wire* is a national news and current affairs program broadcast daily on community radio around Australia. The program is created by three consortium stations: 2SER in Sydney, Radio Adelaide and 4EB in Brisbane. The program recently secured funding to include paid content from contributor stations RTR FM in Perth, Joy FM in Melbourne and the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) based in Alice Springs. With a potential listener base of over one million people, the program is available to over 200 stations via satellite through the CAAMA radio network, the Community Radio Network and the Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media (QRAM) Network. The program is produced out of the consortium newsrooms, each with a producer and a team of volunteers. *The Wire* broadcasts from Monday to Friday: the Sydney newsroom produces the program on Monday and Tuesday, Adelaide on Wednesday and Thursday, and Brisbane on Friday. The content of each program is guided by an editorial policy that includes:

- Contributing new and useful information, analysis and comment, adding to public awareness and understanding of important issues,
- Giving particular attention to the voices of women, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, people on low incomes and others under-represented in social decision-making,
- Drawing ideas and information as far as possible from communities, organisations, and individuals directly involved in social action or directly affected by policies, decisions or proposals (2015).

Of the nine editorial guidelines, these points pertained most directly to the research questions at hand. As a current affairs program, *The Wire* has more scope to include stories that are not necessarily linked to the news of the day, but that still hold significance for the community of listeners. In addition, the researcher worked with the program for over four years and, as the Brisbane producer, had an in-depth understanding of what content was appropriate.

The experiment aimed to produce a current affairs radio package that incorporated principles of public journalism while still adhering to the editorial guidelines of *The Wire* and principles of community radio broadly as outlined by the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2008). In terms of logistical guidelines, stories on *The Wire* are generally between three and seven minutes in duration and contain at least two interview talent. In accordance with these guidelines and the editorial policy, a package was produced for broadcast. Three interviews were conducted around the issue of breast cancer screening rates in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, a topic identified by the local community as one of importance to them. As a current affairs story, the topic was not linked to the news of the day and was created as a longer, more narrative-focussed package and included mobilising information aimed at assisting listeners in similar situations. In terms of what was practically created, “Breast cancer screening in multicultural women” is a six minute current affairs story in package format. The story featured excerpts from the three interviews conducted and was pre-recorded for broadcast on Friday, June 6, 2014 on *The Wire*. The story was also uploaded to [www.thewire.org.au](http://www.thewire.org.au).

## Discussion

The most significant finding of the research was public journalism’s implications for news gathering in a community radio setting. Public listening was identified as a defining characteristic of public journalism and is widely discussed within the literature (Campbell, 2007; Charity, 1995; Rosen, 1995). It was found that employing public listening in the news-gathering phase of production was an effective way of engaging with listeners. Public listening goes deeper than jotting down or recording the answers to simplistic, time-poor questions prevalent in the news gathering approaches of traditional journalism. Public listening is about building meaningful connections within the community to gain trust and elicit the real concerns of the people. It relies on citizens to identify important issues and help set the agenda for what stories and issues should be covered. A powerful tool for journalists, actively listening to the community to set the news agenda and foster deep engagement between the media and its audience ensures a more concrete investment from the audience in their news.

Academically, public listening presents nothing but opportunities for a community radio newsroom. Practically however there are two potentially problematic issues with an approach that focuses on

public listening. As Nip (2010, p. 144) explains, public listening “placed journalists in the position of wandering around the streets and talking to people haphazardly...Charity (1995, 21) suggests “patience, empathy and a carefully structured set of questions” are the key to optimising the public listening process. Initially, this would be a steep learning curve for journalists accustomed to eliciting just the who, what, where, when and how from its talent. An interview incorporating thorough public listening can require up to four hours of preparation for every hour of conversation (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001). Four hours of preparation time is a daunting prospect for those on deadline but as the newsroom becomes more accustomed to the approach, this amount of time is sure to diminish.

In accordance with traditional approaches to public journalism, a community meeting was the source of inspiration for the story. This form of public listening is widely regarded as best practice within the public journalism literature (Campbell, 2007; Charity, 1995; Merrill et al, 2001; Rosen, 1995). As it was not feasible to gather a representative sample of *The Wire*’s national audience within the course of everyday program production, the focus of this project was segmented to focus on female listeners of producer station 4EB. 4EB regularly holds a Women’s Luncheon where female broadcasters and members of the community gather to discuss topical issues. *The Wire* has no budget to facilitate these kinds of community forums, so the research made use of 4EB’s existing program. The forum discussed a range of issues relevant to broadcasters and the larger community. A topic that arose at the luncheon was breast cancer screening rates in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, a major demographic of 4EB as a multi-lingual broadcaster. This topic was generated by the community and discussed at length by those present. Some broadcasters opted to run public service announcements during their programs and others pledged to use their relationships with the language groups to facilitate ongoing conversations with support services. It was unanimously regarded as an important issue that community radio, particularly 4EB as an ethnic broadcaster, could play a major role in influencing. Further research into the topic was conducted following the community forum and initial fact-finding discussions with potential interviewees were conducted. While the topic of the story had emerged quite organically from the community, research revealed it was also an issue of broader significance nationally which made it an appropriate story for *The Wire*’s broader audience.

The approach to public listening used in this project, while valuable, would by no means be a practical way of sourcing story ideas every news day. This particular approach to public listening was more reminiscent of the ‘town hall’ style public forums. The tight deadline of each show and the fact the newsroom consists almost entirely of volunteers means this would be nearly impossible on a regular basis. It should however be encouraged where possible. Tapping into station resources such as meetings and forums is an excellent way of gauging community interest in particular topics. While further research would be needed to ascertain the topic’s relevance to *The Wire*’s national audience, these meetings represent a cost-effective way for the program to engage in the more traditional form of public listening. As a way of setting the news agenda, public listening holds great appeal to *The Wire*. A recurring problem for many years has been how to generate original stories rather than just providing an alternative angle. The volunteers, at least initially, tend to rely on what is being covered in other media and press releases, discussions around how to encourage news generation have been ongoing among producers for many years. 4EB’s Women’s Luncheon is just one example of an event that could be attended by volunteers in order to engage in public listening for story

generation. The consortium stations, 4EB, 2SER and Radio Adelaide, are active organisations among their respective communities and host a wide range of events that could be used for this purpose.

While the project was considered successful, more in-depth, quantitative research is required before public journalism could be meaningfully implemented within a community radio newsroom. Though outside the scope of this research, audience surveys and listenership numbers would be valuable data that could potentially further support the case for public journalism within a community radio setting.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examines the potential applications of public journalism to community radio news-gathering. The research aimed to establish several simple ways in which public journalism could be integrated into everyday community radio new practices to yield democratic benefits within the community. A literature review focussing on the roles of alternative media, specifically community radio, and past experiences with public journalism informed a case study set within *The Wire*, a national news and current affairs program broadcast on Australian community radio. Previously identified key aspects of public journalism were then tested in a practical sense in the form of a radio package for broadcast.

Community radio has significant potential to engage with listeners on a deeper level for positive democratic outcomes. Community radio was chosen as the medium for this experiment due to its inclusive and democratic nature, its rhizomatic presence, as well as its relative stability compared to other forms of media. The sector has been experiencing growth in both the number of listeners and stations despite the struggles facing the rest of the media industry. While the majority of talks and music content already contribute to what the communities want to hear, news coverage has the potential to contribute more to building deep connections with listeners. This would however, require a new approach to journalism. Public journalism, a form of deliberative journalism, is an alternative to traditional journalism that focusses on reporting on what is important to the listeners and providing the listeners with the tools to actively improve the community.

The research and accompanying work of journalism has refined public journalism to fit within a community radio newsroom. The research in conjunction with the creative work has proven the hypothesis that a few key public journalism principles can be easily integrated into news-gathering practices in community radio news rooms to foster greater public deliberation and growth of civic capital. These findings are significant because they represent an effective implementation of an alternative approach to journalism that has great potential for benefits within stations and the larger community. This project has laid the ground work for future larger-scaled, more in-depth research into the topic such as implementation of the principles over a longer time period and consequent surveys of broadcasters and audience members. Alternative media has a long history with alternative approaches to content and content creation, news and journalism should be no exception to this tradition.

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